

Contact Strengthens Tennessee Health Department's Legislative Influence



H. P. HOPKINS, Ph.D., and DON DODSON, M.A.

Dr. Hopkins is chief, office of planning and development, Tennessee Department of Public Health. He was responsible for developing the local contact program described in this article. Mr. Dodson currently is working toward a doctoral degree in political science at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Tearsheet requests to Dr. H. P. Hopkins, Tennessee Department of Public Health, 338 Cordell Hull Building, Nashville, Tenn. 37219.

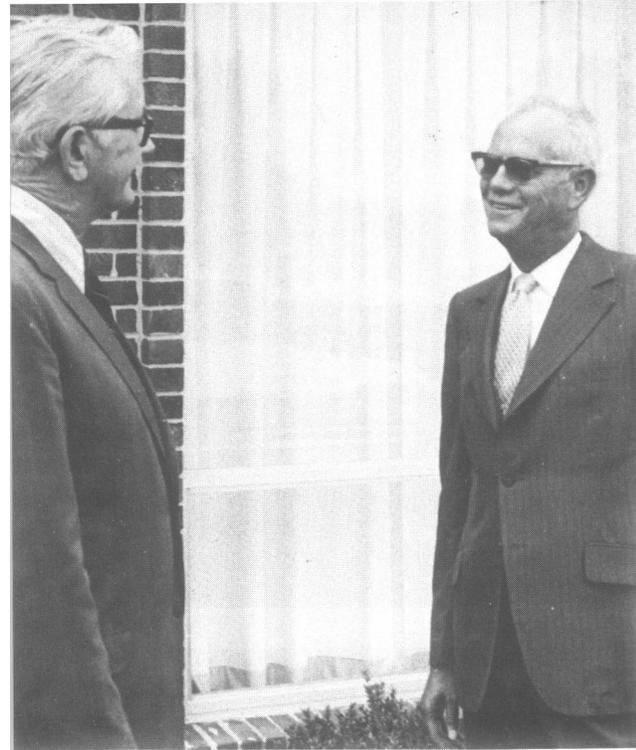
The need for adequate health legislation is so monumental that today's public health administrators are seeking new approaches to the legal and political aspects of their profession. The often-heard cry, "Take health out of politics," is giving way to a more realistic approach: "How can we be more effective in the political field?" Public health policymakers have long talked about the best method of passing or defeating a bill. More often than not the talk was still going on while the

legislature was either unaware of the agency's desires or not motivated enough to take action. Few State health departments have used their full resources or potential to effect needed legislation and oppose undesirable recommendations.

Using a principle of merchandising—the product is its own best selling point—the Tennessee Department of Public Health initiated a legislative information program (later called the contact program) in January 1971. The effort was not intended as a pressure tactic but instead was to be informational and nonpartisan. The program was based on the following assumptions:

1. Tennessee legislators are generally honest and capable, but they need more information concerning health needs.

2. In a democratic government, State agencies have a duty to inform legislators of their particular needs as well as the needs of the people they serve.



James Austin, environmentalist of the department (left), discusses legislation with Rep. Edward Bailey

3. The health of the citizens of the State is related directly to health legislation.

Organizing the Program

A legislative contact from each county was nominated by State health officials whose duties included working closely with county health departments. All nominees were health department staff members (health officers, clerks, nurses, sanitarians, others) who were interested or experienced in community affairs. A letter explaining the program was sent to each nominee from the State health officer. The nominees were asked to accept responsibility for contacting legislators and for encouraging others to participate in the program. Nominees were given the opportunity to refuse the nominations, but only one declined.

To explain the program and clarify responsibilities, regional orientations for the legislative contacts were held approximately 3 weeks before the legislature convened. The contacts gained an overview of how a bill becomes a law and were briefed on health bills to be introduced. Instruction was followed by comments, questions, and answers, primarily concerning specific responsibilities of the contact person. Explaining that the project was volunteer work, usually to be done on weekends and in spare time, training leaders gave the nomi-

nees a second opportunity to withdraw. No one chose to do so. Moreover, the response was enthusiastic, and the training program was well received.

Each nominee received a legislative kit containing a schematic drawing of how a bill becomes a law in the General Assembly of Tennessee (with written explanations), a list of other legislative contacts, a list of legislative terms with their definitions, budget information, suggestions on letter writing, and a form on which to record the contact action. Another item in the packet—probably the most useful—was a booklet that included a photograph of each legislator, the district he represented, his home address and telephone number, his Nashville (capital of Tennessee) address and telephone number, his wife's name, and his occupation. The booklet contained legislative maps, seating charts in the General Assembly, standing committee membership, and information about the Governor's staff. The booklet also gave information on U.S. Senators and Representatives.

Communications

Regular communication between the State office and the counties was an essential function of the program. This communication was maintained chiefly through Legislative Notes, a weekly publication mailed to the contacts and distributed within the State office. Occasionally, special editions appeared, and the telephone was used for immediate contact. For the most part, however, Legislative Notes seemed to relay information to the field on time.

During the 2 weeks between the orientation sessions and convening of the General Assembly, the first edition of Legislative Notes appeared, reemphasizing the points made at the sessions: do not play party politics or threaten a legislator, be openminded and informed, know the facts on both sides of the issue, and respect the unique position of the legislator.

Legislative Notes was always printed on green paper—a color used for no other regular departmental communication. This allowed the person opening the envelope to know immediately what it contained and to whom it should be routed. Most material in Legislative Notes explained some aspect of a bill. The bill was identified by legislative number, particular area of concentration, sponsor, and the committee to which referred. For example, the following excerpt concerns a bill designed to place motor vehicles within the legal definition of air pollution.

CLEAN AIR ANYONE?

Help! I'm choking on auto and truck exhaust emissions.

House Bill 190 (SB 138) is designed to allow the Air Pollution Control Board to recognize motor vehicles as an air contaminant source. The Legislatures own Council has reported that cars and trucks are *the* major air pollutant sources in Tennessee, but at the present time this Bill is bottled-up in the House Conservation Committee.

Members of the Committee: Garner, Chairman; West, Vice Chairman; Berryhill, Secretary; Bomar, Boner, Bowers, Bowman, Hill (of Cumberland), Hill (of Shelby), Huffstetler, Lowe, Murphy (of Davidson), Murray, Neese, Robinson (of Washington), Ross, Shacklett, Stafford, Watson, Webb, West and E. Williams.

Political experts told us this was a good bill, but it had little chance of passing because of strong organized lobbying and lack of concern by the general public. We can prove them wrong. The challenge is ours. If we are successful, cleaner air and better health will be our reward. Isn't it worth it?

Contact your Representatives and let them know that we want clean air in Tennessee. If immediate action is not taken, this Bill will never reach the House floor.

Legislative Notes also explained the purpose of the bill, its contents, and the reasons for passing or defeating it in terms of the health needs of Tennessee's citizens. In following weeks, the progress of the bill was charted and supporting data were given. The publication also contained evaluations of the passages or failures of bills, voting records, and advance notice of bills to be introduced in the next session.

Although the main function of Legislative Notes was to inform contacts of pending legislation, the publication included several other features. A summary of the President's message on health, a copy of the Governor's budget message, information concerning environmental workshops, an occasional humorous story, a quote from Rod McKuen, and even a poem about pollution appeared from time to time. Complete copies of bills were often mailed with Legislative Notes, sometimes even before the bills were introduced.

The Tennessee Legislature usually convened late Monday afternoon and recessed on Thursday. Most legislators returned to their home districts for the weekend. Since it was important that Legislative Notes be received before the weekend, we mailed the publication before Wednesday afternoon each week. The procedure remained basically the same: as soon as one edition was mailed, work began on the next.

Morning work usually was started by examining the legislative activities of the previous day. (Of



Dr. Hopkins, program coordinator, explains progress of bill to Dr. Mary Duffy, director, Knox County Health Department

136 health-related bills introduced, only the major ones were discussed in Legislative Notes.) For top priority bills, an up-to-the-minute check of progress was made throughout the day. The department's official position on these bills and its reasons were determined; this information usually became the thesis for an article in Legislative Notes.

Departmental information and official positions on bills were collected Thursdays and Fridays. On weekends, this information was compiled, and ideas were formulated for the contents of the week's Legislative Notes. Mondays were spent in reviewing facts and figures and in giving departmental specialists a preview of information to be printed in their relative fields. As might be assumed, a great deal of the "writing" of Legislative Notes was accomplished through much listening and legwork. Tuesday mornings usually were the most hectic since Monday night legislative sessions consistently produced increased activity.

After assimilating information on introductions and the progress of bills, obtaining official positions, and so on, the actual task of writing Legislative Notes was begun. Because of the time factor, the first draft usually was the final draft. The master sheet went to the printers Tuesday afternoon, and the printed Legislative Notes were re-



Rep. Roscoe Pickering (left) listens to Houston County Health Department's Mary Smith, nurse (right); Donnie Lewis, environmentalist; and Michie Gill, clerk

turned the same day or early Wednesday morning, then mailed immediately. Envelopes were prepared in advance. The time necessary for preparing an adequate written communication shortened as experience was gained, but in the first year, the trial-and-error method proved to be quite time consuming.

Year-Round Program

Although the Tennessee General Assembly meets only a few months each year, the contact program was designed to be continuous. Since the Legislature adjourned, publication of Legislative Notes has continued and the notes have been distributed on a routine basis. By using information from Legislative Notes, local contacts can evaluate their success or failure and plan strategies for the coming legislative session. For example, with accessibility to voting records, a contact can determine if legislators have been candid with him.

Tennessee's public health workers meet periodically with local contacts to discuss the merits of the program and to plan future legislative needs



Conclusion

A detailed evaluation of the program is currently being conducted and will be reported. Preliminary review indicates that the contacts are generally sincere and energetic and that almost all want to continue in their present roles. Most were successful in obtaining assistance from other health department employees as well as private citizens. The program did not seem to interfere in any way with their routine duties.

Measuring the effectiveness of such a program is difficult, but it can be safely concluded that hundreds of contacts were made, and many people became involved in the democratic process of representative government as a result of this locally oriented program. Furthermore, the program has proved that a statewide coordinated effort can be effective in the promotion of quality health legislation for the State citizenry.